

HISTORY Encounters with the Dalai Lama reveal a unique view of the world and his country, writes **Claire Scobie**.
SOCIETY Oliver James' prescriptive analysis of our consumer-oriented culture fails to convince **Guy Rundle**.

Having faith in the future for Tibet

The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama

By Thomas Laird
 Atlantic, \$35

ON OCTOBER 7, 1950, the highest ministers of the Tibetan government were having a picnic in Lhasa when a radio message came through that the Chinese People's Liberation Army had invaded. The low-ranking secretary who took the call said the ministers could not be disturbed. In response, the field officer screamed over the radio, "Shit on their picnic!" and hung up. Less than two weeks later, 5000 Tibetan soldiers had been killed and more than 40,000 Communists had invaded.

This anecdote encapsulates much that was wrong with Tibet: it "was a deeply flawed nation", says the 14th Dalai Lama. While the nobility refused to modernise for fear of losing their wealth and privileges, the high lamas, so convinced of the power of their deities, believed that making offerings would save them from Mao Zedong's wrath. It was, says the Dalai Lama, "stupid... just blind faith and ignorance".

To reflect on the mistakes in one's own past with detachment can be challenging. To do so about the history of one's country, when still enduring the consequences of occupation and exile, would be, for most, impossible. But in this book, based on more than 50 hours of interviews with the Dalai Lama, Tibet's history is prised open in a singularly detached and breathtaking manner.

It takes Thomas Laird, a hard-nosed American photojournalist with "no faith" in the "divine guidance of human affairs", several years to appreciate how the Dalai Lama's meditation practices have taught him non-attachment and how profoundly that has shaped his world view.

Unlike politicians who are keen to



defend their patch, the Dalai Lama first looks at the mistakes Tibet has made and then to the faults of other countries. He also has a distinctive "common" and "uncommon" view of history.

"There can be two visions of the same thing," he says. Some people have "pure insight developed through spiritual practice" and others are conventional. Both, he insists, are true and "from a Buddhist viewpoint there are no difficulties to accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the second level".

When Laird hears this, he is stunned. As the American writer returns again and again to meet Tenzin Gyatso, who greets him wearing maroon robes and red plastic thongs in his modest home in northern India, Laird is changed, and this gradual transformation humanises the dense subject of

The 14th Dalai Lama talks to an American photojournalist about sometimes weak, inward-looking Tibet.

FRANK ROST

Tibet's sprawling past, from the first Tibetans to the present day.

Some of the most poignant details are in the chapters about the 13th Dalai Lama, Thupten Gyatso, who lived from 1876 to 1933. By the end of his life, he had regained full Tibetan independence and withstood two invasions, first by the British in 1904 and then by the Marquis Empire in 1910. Despite attempts to reform the government and create an army, Thupten Gyatso faced resistance from the ruling classes and monasteries that argued that soldiers would be a threat to Buddhism.

After his death, Tibet reverted to a weak, inward-looking state and, says the 14th Dalai Lama, "no one bothered to know what was happening (in) the world around them". It was during these uncertain times that the current Dalai Lama grew up.

Tenzin Gyatso spent his childhood inside the cavernous Potala Palace with a thousand monks. He was never taught any history, politics or statecraft and had little preparation for the life he would lead once the Chinese invaded.

Laird argues convincingly that historically Tibet was never part of China as Beijing claims. While the Mongols dominated Tibet and China in the 13th century, this "in no way unified the two countries into a Chinese state".

The Mongol subjugation of the Tibetans was the first intervention of a foreign power in Tibet — the first of many — and, Laird says, ultimately it led to the tragedy of today. The Dalai Lama concurs and "in an infinitely sad tone, says, 'Today's tragedy did not develop overnight but over decades, centuries.'"

While the research and academic weight of this study is breathtaking, I did get somewhat bogged down in the middle chapters. But it is the cut-and-thrust of debate between Laird and the Dalai Lama that brings the history alive. Laird reveals much about the personality and human frailties of the Tibetan leader, what rattles him and when he felt acutely betrayed.

In 1954, when Tenzin Gyatso was 15 years old, Chairman Mao invited him to travel through China. He had no choice, the Dalai Lama says, his voice quivering. "With no response from the UN, the Indian or British or American government, I had to deal with the invaders."

Today, the Dalai Lama is keen to look forward. He remains optimistic that change will come in Tibet as a result of change in China. Ultimately, he believes that while there are different interpretations of history from the Chinese and Tibetan side and the "power of the gun is immediate and strong... We must retain our faith in truth."

Claire Scobie is author of *Last Seen in Lhasa* (Rider).

Welcome to the next stage of evolution — the hyperindividual

Affluenza

By Oliver James
 Vermilion, \$30.95

SAM EARNs \$US20 MILLION (\$A25 million) a year, and will inherit about a billion dollars. He lives in a Manhattan apartment, five stores hollowed out to one flowing space, trades stocks, and orders the delivery of teenage "models" over the phone like a Chinese maid.

He is, says Tom (an employee who Sam claims is his "best friend"), cruel, isolated, paranoid and terminally bored — a human black hole.

Sam's sad story opens psychologist Oliver James' account of life in a surplus culture, a portrait of global hypermodernism based on interviews and fieldwork in London, New York, Shanghai, Denmark, Singapore and, not least, Sydney.

That this is the second book with the title *Affluenza* (Clive Hamilton's is the other) is the most visible manifestation of renewed interest in the problems generated by a prosperous, consumer-oriented economy and its cultural manifestations.

Last time around was the '60s, when the work of writers such as

Marcuse, Illich, Schumacher and others challenged the emerging high-tech, plastic postwar civilisation. When the political program suggested by their ideas — communes, co-operatives, low-tech living — collapsed within a decade, the cheerful nihilism of "greed is good" rushed in to fill the vacuum.

Now, as the gap between professional and working-class wages widens, a hitherto unprecedented supply of goods and services has become available to a numerically significant class of people. The result, James says, has been a spread of a particular type of unhappiness involving uncontrollable envy, isolation, perpetual dissatisfaction and a sense of internal deadness, spreading among large groups of the newly wealthy.

The benighted Sam is the vanishing point of these trends, but aspects of it appear in the lives of people across the globe, from the "Shanghai girls" stacked high in the apartments of the reborn Chinese megacity, to the McMansions of McSydney, where James finds affluenza to be at its global worst.

Applying Erich Fromm's distinction between lives dominated by either "having" or "being" — once you become dominated by the



Oliver James

former, self and others become commodities rather than people.

So much of this is so clearly true, and James' in-depth encounters with the lost tribes wanders the desert of the real are so evocative and well-rendered, that it feels almost charitable to point out that, as it progresses, this book goes nuts, with a mind-bogglingly naïf program of social and political change to defeat the big "A".

The insight into the illusory manic omnipotence of people such as Sam turns out to be a blind spot, as James urges troubled readers to consider a political regime (all politicians to be made the full-time caretaker of a two-year-old upon election, boring jobs to be paid more than interesting ones, presumably by waving a wand) that would embarrass a 15-year-old emo anarchist.

James ends up in this crazy place because, having rejected the concept of "mental illness" (as a way to turn life problems into a purely chemical problem) he brings the medical model back in with the "affluenza" metaphor. Deep-seated problems of high-tech, hypermodern culture are placed outside it, as a discrete pathology.

Via Fromm, James has reached back to a Marxism that is insufficient

to theorising the contemporary world.

People are self-commodifying, in part, because a high-tech media world increasingly makes human connection a voluntary, rather than necessary, activity — and we haven't yet begun to think this through. Hyperindividuals in a media flux, people shop not only to have but also to connect, in one of the few remaining ways that is currently offered to them.

Scandinavia, where James finds affluenza at its lowest and people at their best, is a case in point. As a recent book about the Swedish notes, the very success of a person-centred semi-socialist society — in which poverty, poor health care or scarcity of education have been reduced close to zero — has created problems of autonomy and disconnection.

That a culture in which consumption plays a far smaller role in everyday life can have such problems is a measure of how separate they are to the specifics of a retail era.

The Affluenzists will need to delve deeper to give a full account of the troubled spirit of the age.

Guy Rundle is European editor of *Area* magazine.